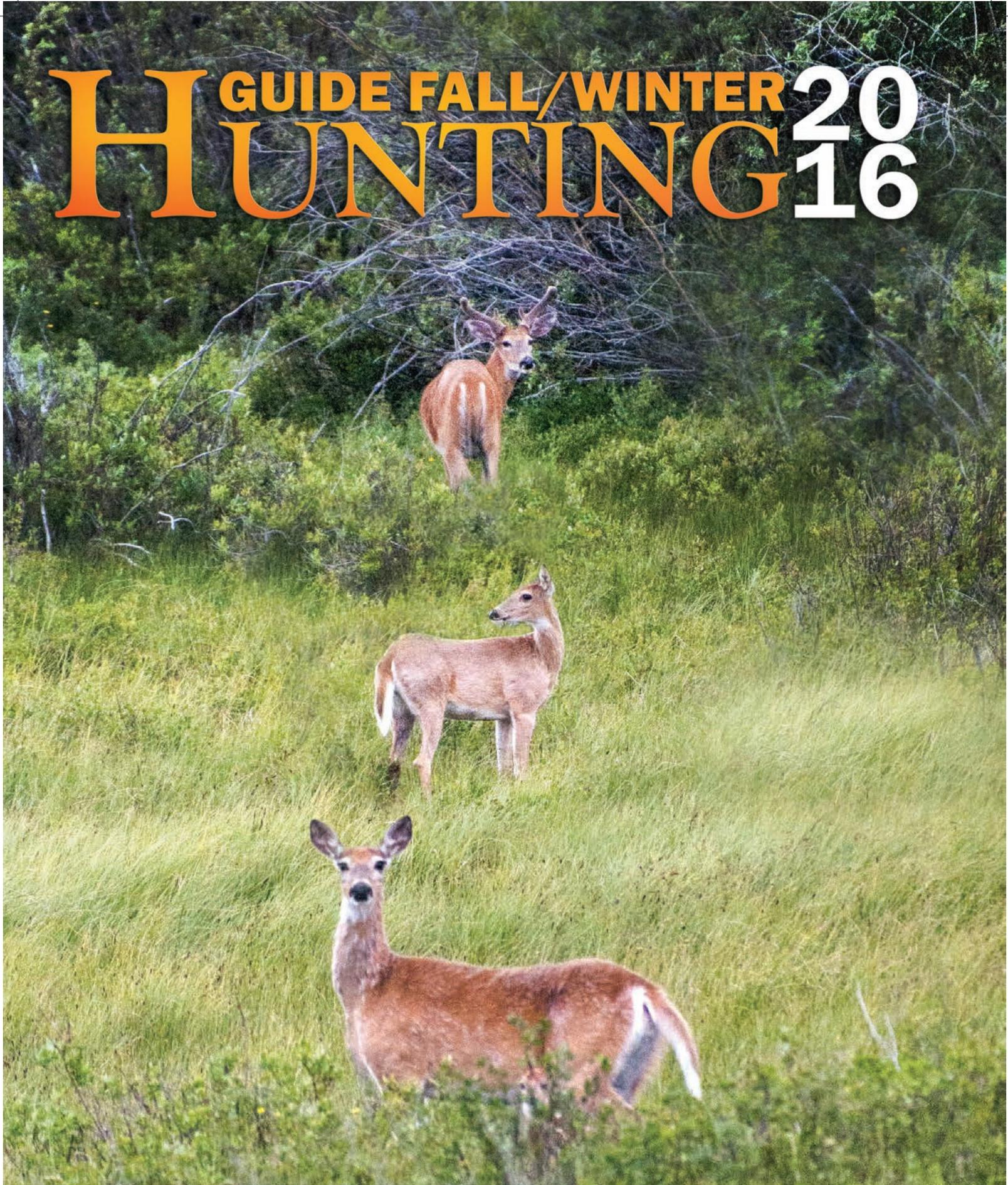


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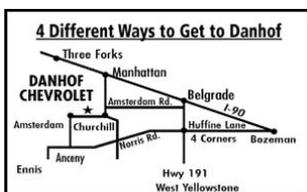
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Montana's millions of acres of private land offer some excellent hunting opportunities — the only catch is gaining the landowner's permission to hunt. It is Montana law that hunters obtain landowner permission to hunt on all private land.

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Provide complete information about yourself and your hunting companions, including vehicle descriptions and license numbers.

Explain what type of hunting you wish to do, and be sure to ask any questions which can help clarify the conditions of access. Follow the landowner's instructions, and bring with you only the companions for whom you obtained landowner permission.

Be sure to thank the landowner after your hunt.

Hunters and landowners can learn more by investing some time on Montana's Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project, an information program for anyone interested in promoting responsible hunter behavior and good hunter and landowner relationships in Montana. Visit FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov, then click "Hunting" under Quick Links.

For more information on hunting access in Montana, check out the "Hunter Access" pages on FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov.



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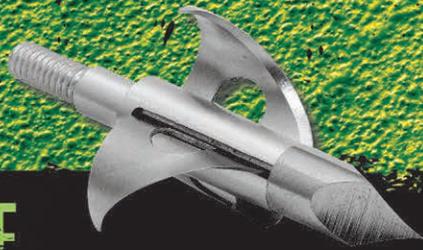


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What to do with your big game carcass

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

How to best dispose of a big game carcass after the meat is in the freezer is a question all hunters face. The answer is simple enough but the regulations and reasons behind it are not understood by many hunters and that can lead to violations and fines.

“All carcass parts remaining after processing a game animal should be disposed of in a regulated landfill or at a transfer station,” said Ron Aasheim, spokesman for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in Helena. In many communities fur buyers and hide tanners will purchase deer and elk hides.

Montana law, applicable on all state-owned and managed sites, prohibits leaving dead animals or refuse on public property, including all state-owned and managed lands which would include FWP managed fishing access sites and wildlife management areas.

These laws may surprise some hunters, especially those for whom dumping big game carcasses in the woods has been standard practice.

“It is not only illegal to dump big game carcasses, it is a bad idea for health and sanitation-related reasons,” Aasheim said. “Even on private land there are restrictions that apply to the handling of animal carcasses.”

For example, human health-related state laws prohibit the placing of animal carcasses in any Montana lake, river, creek, pond or reservoir.

Laws that apply to the disposal of big game carcasses can be found in the Code of Federal Regulations. These laws include those that apply to the management of refuse and debris on U.S. Forest



A pair of young elk passes a road in the East Fork of the Bitterroot in this file photo.

Perry Backus, Montana Lee Newspapers

Service lands and other related issues.

U.S. Forest Service enforcement sources say forest rules on dumping and proper storage and disposal of potential bear attractants — which a big game carcass is — are also posted at most ranger offices.

Hunters who go out-of-state are reminded that it is illegal to bring heads and spinal cords from harvested game animals back into Montana from any state or Canadian province where Chronic Wasting Disease is present in either wild animals or game farm animals. Skull caps and antlers with no tissue remaining may be transported back to Montana.

For more information on sanitation laws and other rules in effect on state and federal lands, please check the websites of the land management agencies responsible for the lands you plan to hunt.

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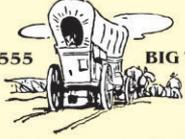
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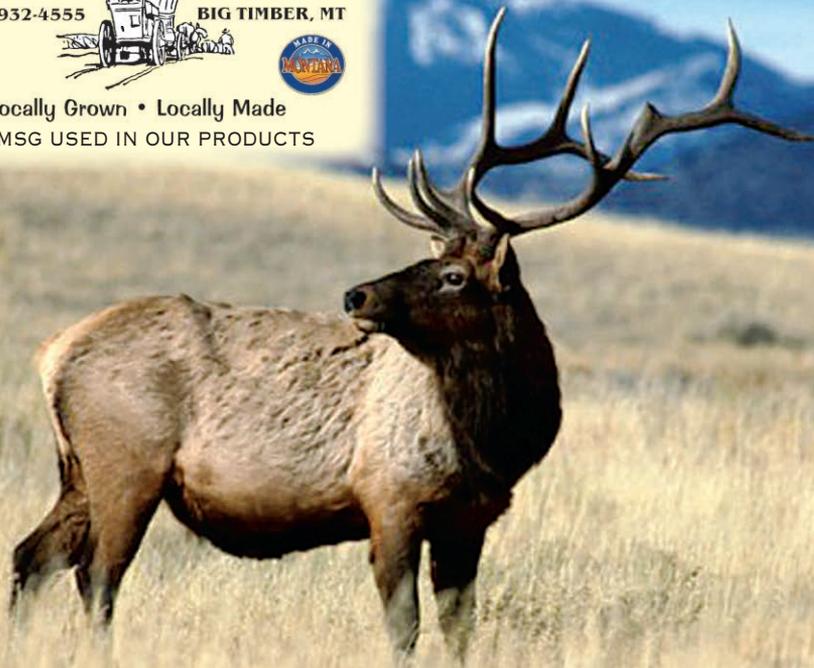
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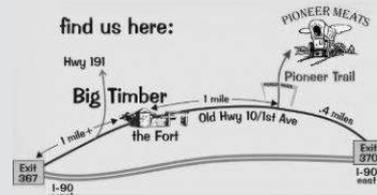
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Bull elk

Elk surveys are looking good in Dillon, Deer Lodge, Butte areas

TOM KUGLIN

Montana Lee Newspapers

Whether it's chasing bugles in September or filling the freezer at winter's onset, elk hunting in southwest Montana is opportunity rich.

As the old saying goes, "Whitetails are low, mule deer are high and elk are where you find them," and Montana's Region 3 is no exception. Found throughout

river valleys, mountain basins and the forests in between, an elk hunt can be one of the most varied animals in terms of terrain.

Biologists report that hunters are finding success with robust elk populations in most areas.

"I think we're doing good – we do have a few areas that are under objective in the Gallatin and Paradise Valley, but overall we're at or slightly

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“I’ve seen some really good bulls shot in recent years and a lot better than when I first started out.”

— Gary Dudden, owner, Rocky Mountain Archery in Butte

big elk numbers, populations southeast of Helena in the Big Belts have been a source of focus for FWP the last couple of years. With populations double or even triple objective, hunters will see a new opportunities in the area to bring those numbers closer to objective.

The boundary expanded for District 391 in Broadwater County and hunters may harvest either a brow-tined bull or antlerless elk with a general tag.

Shoulder seasons were initially proposed in Districts 391 and 392 but later withdrawn due to lack of land-owner support.

Shoulder seasons will be held in Bridger Districts 393, 312 and 390 where populations remain double objective. An elk B license for the three districts also allow hunters to take an extra cow as aggressive management means additional chances to put meat in freezers.

Elk surveys and harvest data in the Dillon, Deer Lodge and Butte areas all show populations at or above objective.

“We’re in good shape down there (Dillon) and sometimes in more than good shape,” Burt said. “We do have some limitations with access but we had a pretty good harvest last year.”

For hunters in search of big bulls, hunting the rut of archery season has panned out for area archers, said Gary Dudden, owner of Rocky Mountain Archery in Butte.

“I’ve seen some really good bulls shot in recent years and a lot better than when I first started out,” he said.

Dudden teaches bowhunter education and reports a continued high interest in archery, particularly among women. The shop opens

seven days per week ahead of the season as hunters tune their equipment in anticipation of making their shots count.

“I would say in our area, the early archery antelope season draws a lot of people, a few do hunt whitetails but not many hunt mule deer because that situation is so bad,” he said. “I’d say antelope but definitely elk are what most people are after.”

Long managed to produce some of the biggest bulls in the state, the Elkhorns District 380 continues to show that limited tags can make years of waiting worthwhile. The average bull harvested last year was 7.7 years old for the hunters lucky enough to draw an either sex permit.

“It seems to be working very well,” Burt said. “We still believe we can consistently harvest those older aged bulls and that was the objective. We’re not going to tinker with that.”

The elk outlook is not quite as rosy for districts south of Bozeman to Yellowstone National Park. Several of the Gallatin/Madison districts continue to survey below objectives while those at objective include the Hyalite and lower Gallatin districts.

The biggest changes are coming in Gardiner District 313, where hunters will see new restrictions in response to a lack of older aged bulls. Hunters may harvest brow-tined bulls until Nov. 13, at which time only hunters who drew a special permit may harvest a bull until the end of the season.

Tom Kuglin is a reporter for the Helena Independent Record.



Jim Peaco photo

above objective,” said Howard Burt, Region 3 wildlife supervisor for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. “We’ve had some very good hunting seasons with the right conditions to get a good harvest.”

Winter reared its head in late November across the region. Hunters used the snow and cold to their advantage as animals pushed down from the high country into more easily accessible locales.

While early frigid conditions may have suggested tough times for wintering animals, February brought big changes.

“The first of February was like a tropical heat wave,” said Adam Grove, Townsend-area biologist. “Winter survival should’ve been good.”

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Tips on correct use of bear spray

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee recommends the use of bear spray and urges hunters to learn other bear-aware safety measures.

Hunters in bear country need to:

- carry bear spray and know how to use it,
- hunt with a partner, leave detailed plans with someone and check-in periodically,
- pay attention to fresh bear sign. Look for bear tracks, scat, and concentrations of natural foods,
- use caution when hunting areas that have evidence of bear activity or areas with scavenging birds such as magpies, ravens, or crows.

Most grizzly bears will leave an area if they sense human presence. Hunters who observe a grizzly bear or suspect a bear is nearby should leave the area. If you do encounter a grizzly, stay calm, don't run, and assess the situation by trying to determine if the bear is actually aware of you. Is it, for instance, threatening or fleeing? Always keep the bear in sight as you back away, and leave the area.

Here are some guidelines for using bear spray:

When to use bear spray

Bear spray should be used as a deterrent only in an aggressive or attacking confrontation with a bear.

How to use bear spray

Each person should carry a can of bear spray.

If a bear is moving toward you from a distance of 30-60 feet direct the spray

downward toward the front of the bear with a slight side to side motion so that the bear spray billows up and creates a wide cloud that acts as a barrier between you and the bear.

If the bear is within 30 feet spray continuously at the front of the bear until it breaks off its charge.

Spray additional bursts if the bear continues toward you. Sometimes just the noise of the spray and the appearance of the spray cloud is enough to deter a bear from continuing its charge.

Spray additional bursts if the bear makes additional charges.

A full canister of bear spray is essential for bear encounters.

The expiration date on the spray should be checked annually.

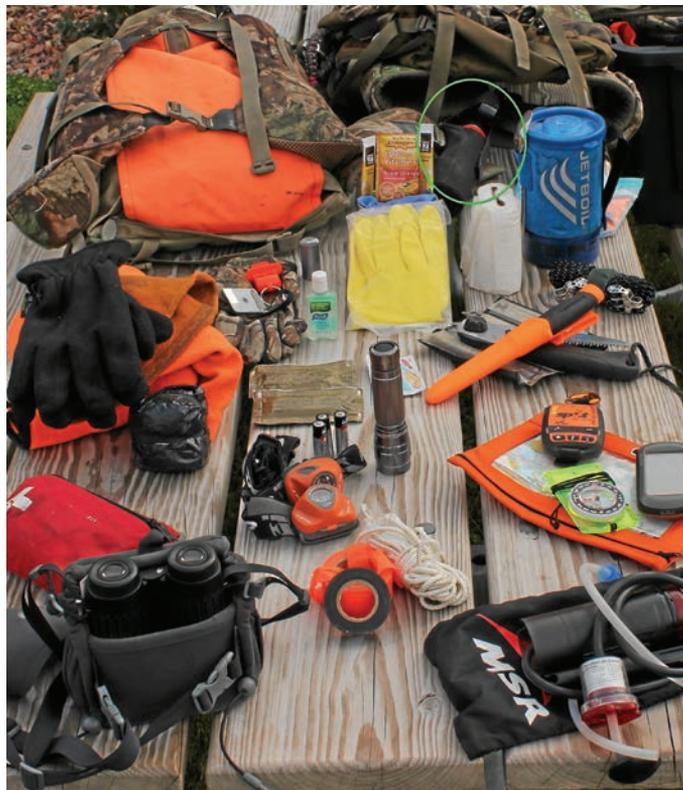
Selecting a bear spray

Purchase products that are clearly labeled "for deterring attacks by bears," and that are registered with the Environmental Protection Agency.

No deterrent is 100 percent effective, but compared to all others, including firearms, bear spray has demonstrated success in a variety of situations in fending off threatening and attacking bears and preventing injury to the person and animal involved.

For more on living with bears and being bear aware, visit FWP website at fwp.mt.gov; then click Be Bear Aware.

For more on bear resistant products, go to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee website.



Tom Kuglin, Montana Lee Newspapers

Bear spray has proven to be an effective predator deterrent and easier to use in a stressful situation than a gun.

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A herd of mule deer bucks

Thom Bridge, Montana Lee Newspapers



Hunters' most common violations

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Every hunting season some individuals unwittingly or knowingly violate the state's game laws.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks officials urge hunters to review Montana's hunting rules and regulations to ensure they act within the law and that they recognize when others violate the hunting regulations and related laws.

Any violation afield can be reported to TIP-MONT at 1-800-TIP-MONT, that is 1-800-847-6668 or Report a Violation online on the Enforcement web page.

Here are some of the most common game violations:

- Failure to obtain permission from landowners before hunting on private property.
- Wasting part of a game animal suitable for food.
- Failure to properly validate a license/tag or to securely fasten the tag in a

visible manner to a game animal immediately after it is taken and before it is moved or transported from the kill site.

- Taking game from the wrong hunting district.
 - Using someone else's tag on a game animal you killed, or tagging a game animal that someone else killed.
 - Shooting game animals on or from any public highway or public right-of-way.
 - Taking game without a license or the proper permit.
 - Failure to validate a big game tag.
 - Not leaving evidence of the sex or species of the game animal attached.
- FWP encourages hunters to protect the future of their sport by hunting responsibly and reporting hunting violations to the toll-free 1-800-TIP-MONT (1-800-847-6668) number or report a violation online at fwp.mt.gov, then click "Enforcement".

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Favorable spring weather conditions lead to good upland bird numbers for the fall

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Just the thought of wings exploding into flight across the prairie or through the pine forests is enough to get the average upland game bird hunter's heart racing.

And fortunately from end to end, corner to corner Montana has upland bird opportunities for the casual to the die-hard hunter.

Upland season starts Sept. 1 with mountain, sage and sharptail grouse along with partridge. Pheasant hunting starts Oct. 8. All seasons end Jan. 1, except sage grouse, which ends Sept. 30.

Gray (Hungarian) Partridge

While no formal surveys are conducted for huns in Montana, weather and habitat conditions suggest huns across the state will range from slightly above to well below average this season, depending on the area of the state. Observations in Regions 4, in the middle of Montana suggest average numbers. In FWP Region 6, northeastern Montana, numerous pairs and broods have been observed so hunters can expect hun numbers to be good given favorable 2016 nesting conditions that likely improved nest success and brood survival. Localized summer hail storms in Regions 4 and 6 likely affected bird numbers resulting in the aforementioned spotty distribution of birds. In south-central Montana, FWP Region 5, conditions were in flux and bird numbers in most of the region will be below average.

A series of mild winters the past few years has generally allowed huns to

increase in distribution and numbers throughout Region 7. Although Hungarian Partridge occur throughout the region, their distribution tends to be spotty. The most robust populations can be found where there is a good interspersed grain, alfalfa and rolling grassy hills or grass ways. Hunters can expect numbers of Hungarian Partridge to range from poor to excellent, depending on localized weather and habitat conditions.

Mountain Grouse

Mountain grouse, a catch all term that includes ruffed, spruce, and dusky (or blue) grouse, are fun to hunt and good to eat. The last few years have been good for these birds in Regions 1 (northwestern Montana), 2 (western Montana), 3 (southwestern Montana) and parts of 4. Particularly in northwestern Montana biologists have been seeing lots of birds and broods. Preliminary information from Region 5 suggests that dusky grouse numbers are better than last year but still below average and ruffed grouse will be at or slightly above average.

Pheasants

Montana is experiencing a large decline in CRP acreage along the northern tier of the state, which may have an impact on hunting experiences in Regions 4 and 6. Based on crow counts and brood sightings in Region 6, along with near ideal summer conditions, pheasant numbers continue to be above average, particularly in the northeast corner of the state. In good pheasant habitats in central Montana — such as around

Conrad and Lewistown — pheasants are “overall pretty good minus those localized areas hit by weather events,” according to Region 4 Wildlife Manager Graham Taylor. Likewise in Region 5 and 3 where the season should be average and better than last year. In Region 1, brood survival appears to be good on the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area and good moisture through the spring and summer should improve habitat over last year's dry conditions. Numbers in the Flathead Valley are holding steady.

In Region 7, Mild winter conditions resulted in high over-winter survival. Spring crow counts indicate the

population going into nesting season was 20 percent or more above long-term-average. However, peak hatch for pheasants occurs around mid-June, which corresponded with extensive thunderstorm activity in southeastern Montana. Overall, pheasant hunting should be average this fall and comparable to last fall, with the best numbers where storm activity was lowest and cover is best.

Sage-Grouse

Sage grouse are another bright spot this year in Montana. After declining lek counts between 2008 and 2014 numbers have really picked up, which is consistent

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with normal population fluctuations and is a result of favorable weather conditions for hatching and brood rearing in 2014 through 2016. Statewide, male attendance at leks, or sage-grouse breeding grounds, averaged about 17 percent above the long-term trends. Consequently, the Fish and Wildlife Commission opened sage grouse hunting across the state this year for the month of September, with a daily bag limit of two and possession limit of four.

Sharp-tailed grouse

Like pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse in Region 6 have been affected by a reduction in CRP acreage, meaning with CRP loss, there will likely be fewer birds and hunters will need to be more mobile in some traditional areas. Lek counts indicate birds are still well above average in eastern Region 6 but are below average in the western portion of the region. In general,

however, across the northern part of the state lek counts and other observations show that hunting should be good this fall. In the central part of the state in Region 4 things look good because the past few years have had favorable conditions for production and survival. In Region 5, numbers are likely similar to last year. Again, warmer-than-average March temperatures kicked breeding off early in Region 7. Nesting conditions were favorable. In general, sharp-tailed grouse distribution is fairly even across the southeastern part of the state. Lek counts and other observations show average numbers; overall the sharp-tailed grouse population continues to be robust, providing good hunting opportunities this fall. Hunting should be good this fall, keeping in mind that severe weather events may have negatively impacted populations in localized areas.



Billings Gazette photo

By far the most popular upland bird in Montana is the ring-necked pheasant.



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Shoulder season begins Aug. 15

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Elk hunters will have opportunities to fill their tags beginning Aug. 15 in several hunting districts around Montana.

A shoulder season is a firearms season that can occur as early as Aug. 15 and run as late as Feb. 15 depending on the hunting district.

While most shoulder seasons focus on antlerless elk harvest on private land and are not intended to replace or reduce harvest during the existing archery or 5-week general firearms seasons, a few are meant to address problematic distribution of elk.

First approved by the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission in October 2015, shoulder seasons are a new opportunity for hunters in hunting districts where elk populations are over objective. For the 2016 season the commission approved shoulder seasons in 43 hunting districts, in six of FWP's seven regions.

Shoulder seasons have specific objectives and as such, the commission and department will monitor the success of shoulder seasons in each hunting district to ensure they are meeting the fundamental objectives.

Hunters are reminded that permission is always required to hunt on private land. The success of shoulder seasons in Montana will require the participation and cooperation of everyone — hunters, landowners and the department.

For more information on shoulder seasons, including an interactive map of hunting districts with shoulder seasons, look on the FWP's website under Shoulder Seasons, a link to which is on the FWP homepage and the hunting home page.

Additionally, each region will have specific information



A group of elk is seen in this file photo.

Kurt Wilson, Montana Lee Newspapers

about shoulder seasons in their areas that can be found on the web page. Some regions will employ elk hunt information coordinators. The contact information for those people will also be on the web page in early August.

Shoulder season regulations can vary from district to district. Some will start as early as Aug. 15 and some will go as late as Feb. 15. So no matter where you're hunting — as always — know the regulations.

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FWP urges hunters to check fire status, make safety a priority

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

With fire season underway in Montana and several counties already implementing fire restrictions, hunters should be keenly aware of the regulations in place in the locations they plan to hunt, at least until the weather begins to cool.

About 5,000 Montana archery hunters can head afield beginning Aug. 15 with their 900 series antelope hunting licenses. Montana's archery-only hunting season for deer, elk, antelope, black bear, wolf and mountain lion begins Sept. 3. Most upland game birds seasons open Sept. 1. The bighorn sheep archery season begins Sept. 3.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks urges hunters to check in with the regional FWP offices or online about potential closures before making final plans.

"Hunters have a big responsibility to be fire conscious," said Ron Aasheim, spokesman for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in Helena. "It is a matter of human safety and protecting private property and the resources of Montana."

Hunters should:

- Drive only on established roads.
- Avoid roads with tall vegetation in the middle track.
- Never park over dry grass and other vegetation.
- Carry a fire extinguisher — or water-filled weed sprayer — shovel, ax, and, a cell phone for emergency calls.
- Restrict camping activities to designated camping areas.
- Build campfires only in established metal fire rings, if allowed.



Courtesy Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest

The lightning-caused Pole and Fine fires were discovered 1 mile from each other in late July 2016. They are about 15 miles southwest of Ennis in the Gravelly Mountains.

- Smoke only inside buildings or vehicles.

- Check on any fire restrictions in place.

"Being able to respond is essential in the first few seconds of a fire start when it's small and easy to extinguish," Aasheim said. "Have an action plan for fire starts as well as for other types of accidents, severe injuries and other emergencies."

For up-to-date details on fire and drought-related restrictions and closures, visit FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov. Click Restrictions & Closures.

Always be prepared to prevent or extinguish fire starts. Your assistance during this time will be appreciated.

"Being able to respond is essential in the first few seconds of a fire start when it's small and easy to extinguish. Have an action plan for fire starts as well as for other types of accidents, severe injuries and other emergencies."

— Ron Aasheim, spokesman, FWP

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Ciara Kempf photo

Levi Kempf of Wise River is seen with his black bear on May 29 in the Pioneer Mountains.



Gary Swoboda photo

Nicole Swoboda of Butte is seen with her bull elk in the Highlands.



Jason Dinius photo

Brady Dinius of Butte is seen with his mule deer in the Highlands, south of Butte.

Photos from the field

Readers from The Montana Standard, the Independent Record and the Mini Nickel Marketplace submitted their favorite hunting photos.



Nick Dunne photo

Keith Sayers of Butte is seen with his elk on Sept. 16.



Jeff Holm

Kelsey Holm's first big game animal. Three years of persistence paid off.



Kathy Wilcox

Allen Wilcox, 11, with his first deer under the apprentice hunter program. Allen chose this deer over a larger one because it was missing a leg and he wanted to do the right thing.

BELOW: Colton Parry's 5x5 mule buck, shot on opening morning of rifle season.

Tara Parry



Carol McEvoy

75 year old grandmother of 10 bags her first elk.



Wendy Nelson

Heather Glahn of Havre shows off her elk.




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Dig into this year's upland game bird guide

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Hunters and their gun dogs have about a month before the upland game bird season begins, so it's a good time to dig into this season's hunting access guide.

To get started, hunters can refer to the Projects Access Guide, published annually by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program.

The guide includes project maps that depict boundaries of private lands enrolled in the UGBEP.

Once hunters have obtained the landowner's permission to hunt, the maps with access boundaries can be an invaluable tool for hunters to locate UGBEP project areas.

The UGBEP Projects Access Guide also contains information on habitat enhancement work done on public lands, Open Fields, pheasant release sites, and the method used to obtain permission in order to hunt upland game birds.

Project maps have been created with "georeferenced capabilities," a fancy way of saying hunters can download the maps from the FWP website to most smart phones and tablets.

Once loaded on a device, georeferenced maps can allow hunters to dynamically view their position on the map relative to important features such as roads and access boundaries.



Brett French, *Montana Lee Newspapers*

Hunters can find the new guide and the maps online at fwp.mt.gov. Click Upland Game Bird Access Guide.

While no Internet connection or cell phone coverage is required to view the maps, a free third-party app of the user's choice is needed for the maps to kick into georeferenced mode. Go to any online App store and search for "georeferenced PDF viewers".

There are several free options available.

Hunters can find the new guide and the maps online at fwp.mt.gov. Click Upland

Game Bird Access Guide.

Printed access guides will be available at FWP headquarters and regional offices late August.

Hunters can also request a copy of the book via FWP's website.

FWP urges Montana hunters to extend their thanks to all partners who collaborate on habitat conservation and access opportunities that benefit wildlife and hunters.

These programs, through partnerships formed with private landowners, government agencies, and conservation organizations provide nearly 300,000 acres of enhanced upland game bird habitat while providing close to 600,000 acres of access to upland game bird hunters.

For more information, contact Debbie Hohler at: 406-444-5674, or by email: dhohler@mt.gov.

Mule deer numbers continue to climb

Area whitetails avoiding disease outbreaks

TOM KUGLIN

Montana Lee Newspapers

Deer hunters in southwest Montana have plenty of reasons for optimism coming into the fall hunting season.

Mule deer numbers continue to climb while whitetails have avoided disease outbreaks hampering populations elsewhere in the state. Whether Region 3 hunters dream of the charcoal forks of a mountain muley or the caramel tines of a river-bottom whitetail, opportunities abound for hunters to fill tags and provide venison for the coming year.

"Mule deer numbers are doing a little better across the region and coming back up," said Howard Burt, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks wildlife manager.

Mule deer populations have been down in recent years and FWP made cuts to antlerless tags in response. Several districts also require validations to hunt buck muleys and hunters must be aware of seasonal regulations for their hunting areas.

Mule deer populations are historically cyclical with



Mule deer numbers continue to climb in southwest Montana.

numbers rebounding despite some early winter die-off last year, Burt said. Biologists attribute the uptick to a couple of factors, namely good growing conditions in recent years include late-summer moisture, and simply an upswing in the cycle.

"They seem to be able to have absorbed that (winter mortality), but a lot of it is due to moisture conditions," Burt said.

FWP estimates Region 3's population at approximately 40,000 mule deer, still below a 10-year average of more than 43,000, but up markedly from the 2013 estimate of less than 34,000.

This season hunters have

more antlerless mule deer opportunities available through special B tags.

"We had a pretty easy winter," said Adam Grove, Townsend-area biologist, adding that a limited number of B licenses for private land were added this year.

Whitetails continue to persist near their long-term average. FWP estimates nearly 23,500 whitetails roam Region 3, only slightly below the 10-year average of about 24,000. While disease has caused some die-offs and concerns in other parts of the state, southwest Montana whitetails have gone unscathed.

"We haven't seen it show

up yet and whitetails are pretty resilient," Burt said.

To harvest a deer hunters must first decide where to go and what to use.

For the novice hunter, Jay Sherley, owner of Capital Sports and Western Wear in Helena, emphasizes getting out early to scout for animals and taking the time to go into a sporting goods or archery shop to talk with knowledgeable people.

For rifle hunters, Sherley recommends an all-around rifle, with a minimum caliber of a .270 or 7mm_08, especially for kids or women starting out.

Archery hunters have seen a major technology push over the last decade with an emphasis on speed. After archery hunting for 30 years, owner of Rocky Mountain Archery in Butte Gary Duden says the latest technology is helping archers in new ways.

"I don't think that we're maxed out on technology at all," he said. "The changes I've seen aren't necessarily about speed — they're not shooting any faster — but they are shooting quieter and smoother and that makes a big difference."

Tom Kuglin is a reporter for the Helena Independent Record.



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FWP courtesy photo

Sage grouse season opens Sept. 1 and runs through the end of the month.

Opportunities expand this year for those hunting sage grouse

GREG LEMON

FWP Information Bureau Chief

Expanded opportunities for sage grouse hunting will be offered this year in Montana as bird populations have rebounded well after two years of favorable spring weather conditions.

Though the brief decline and subsequent bounce back of sage grouse numbers can likely be attributed to weather

and normal cycles in bird populations, the population numbers and quick rebound are encouraging, said Catherine Wightman, wildlife habitat and Farm Bill coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

“These kinds of population cycles are normal, what we’re hoping to do with our habitat conservation efforts and monitoring work is to keep the dips in population from being

so dramatic,” Wightman said.

Sage grouse season opens Sept. 1 and runs through the month, closing Sept. 30. The bag limit is two birds with a possession limit of four.

Sage grouse populations struggle with habitat fragmentation, impacts from energy development and the conversion of sagebrush steppe habitat to cropland. However, decades of efforts at monitoring sage grouse and

conserving their habitat in Montana has paid off. In 2015 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided the bird didn’t warrant listing on the Endangered Species List because of ongoing habitat conservation work in Montana and throughout their range.

Under the FWP Sage Grouse Conservation Plan, adopted in 2005, FWP will recommend to the Fish and Wildlife Commission sage grouse hunting

season closures when populations dip below 45 percent of their long term average. However, before 2014 the Commission had yet to use that rationale to close sage grouse hunting in the state.

In fact, the plan outlined conditions for closing hunting, but didn't have provisions for when hunting would be re-opened. When the hunting season was closed in 2014, the Commission approved conditions for the season to be re-opened. One of the conditions being that sage grouse lek counts were higher in one year than the long-term average. That condition was met this spring, Wightman said. Leks are locations where sage grouse males conduct their mating rituals, which is comprised of strutting, fanning tail feathers and making popping noises with their bulbous air sacs.

Weather watching

Weather conditions play an important role in sage grouse numbers from year to year, particularly during the time when sage grouse hens are incubating eggs in the nest and when the chicks are first hatched, she said.

"After they hatch, they're so vulnerable," Wightman said. "They can walk, but they're downy little fuzz balls walking through the sagebrush. They can't fly and they don't have adult feathers to insulate them."

After several years of wet springs with flooding and hail, the juvenile recruitment was way down in 2013 and overall numbers dropped to some of the lowest since 1980.

However, one good year of recruitment made all the difference.

Weather was favorable for sage grouse in the spring of 2014, so while the overall number of adults were down, the crop of new birds was really good. The males born in the spring of 2014 were

"These kinds of population cycles are normal, what we're hoping to do with our habitat conservation efforts and monitoring work is to keep the dips in population from being so dramatic."

— Catherine Wightman, wildlife habitat coordinator, FWP

displaying on the leks in 2015. This year lek counts in all three FWP sage grouse management areas were above the long-term trends by an average of 17 percent statewide.

Counting leks

For trend data and management decisions, biologists count displaying male sage grouse during the mating period on leks around the state. The birds return to the same leks year after year, and while there are hundreds around Montana, FWP biologists focus on 88 for their counts that influence management decisions, Wightman said.

These 88 leks have long-term data strings with some going back to 1980 and provides a solid foundation for analyzing sage grouse numbers.

"We use those as barometers for population trends," she said.

Hunting and management

While some may be concerned that sage grouse hunting is re-opened, especially considering the effort FWP, the state and landowners have made and continue to make in ensuring populations numbers remain within naturally fluctuating ranges to keep the birds off the ESA, the fact is hunting has little impact on bird numbers.

In the past 16 years, FWP biologists have collared about 1,300 adult birds in areas where hunting was allowed. So far only nine of those birds have been killed by hunters, said John Vore, FWP game management bureau chief.

"That's a very low number," he said. "The effects of

hunting, at least in Montana, are very minimal."

Additionally, though the Montana management plan allows for a more standard hunting season with a bag limit of four birds, the Fish and Wildlife Commission, with recommendations from FWP staff, decided on a conservative season structure with a two-bird bag limit and a season only open from Sept. 1-Sept. 30.

The conservative approach seemed prudent considering the sage grouse in Montana and the rest of the region will have another ESA review in 2020.

Still, Montana's sage

grouse success story is one worth applauding.

"We're the only state in the West that's completely open for sage grouse and we have the longest hunting season," Wightman said.

The continued focus from a management standpoint will be on habitat conservation and making strides toward maintaining stable long-term trends – to especially try and keep the numbers during the low years from getting too low, if possible. The fact is you can still have good years in terms of population, but have declining numbers over all.

"Conservation of habitat is important so we can ensure the long-term trends of the populations are stable," she said. "We aren't trying to get back to the sage grouse populations of the 1960s, but we think we can maintain a steady population by maintaining good habitat and that's the goal."

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HUNTING SNAPSHOTS

Surplus licenses on sale Aug. 8; hunting regs available online

Surplus licenses on sale Aug. 8

Online sale of surplus deer, elk and antelope licenses started Aug. 8. A complete list of hunting districts with surplus licenses is available online. For more information, go online to fwp.mt.gov or call you FWP regional office.

Hunting regulations available online

Montana's deer, elk and antelope regulation book is available online and at all FWP license providers.

All of the general regulations are located at the front of the book, including the list of closed areas or those where limited big game hunting methods are allowed.

Other useful background information – how to obtain licenses, prerequisites, establishing residency, hunter education requirements, application and drawing deadlines, bonus point system details and more can be found at the back. Montana's annual big

game hunting regulations are available on the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov and from most FWP offices and license providers.

Private Land/Public Wildlife Council to meet

The Private Land/Public Wildlife (PL/PW) Council will meet in Helena Aug. 15, from 1 to 8 p.m., and Aug. 16, from 8 a.m. to noon at the Holiday Inn Express Conference Room located at 3170 North Sanders Street, Helena.

The council will get updates on elk shoulder seasons, block management enrollment, and 2016 FWP license sales, and then spend the remainder of the meeting in structured information/question and answer sessions focused around the FWP's Block Management program payment system, program audit issues, program structure, delivery and administrative process. Hunting access issues beyond the scope of the current Block Management program that may require new

programs or processes will also be discussed.

The 17-member council, appointed by the governor, is charged with reviewing FWP access programs and offering recommendations to help achieve program goals and maintaining good relations between hunters and land-owners.

Members of the public are invited to attend the meeting and observe council proceedings. Public comment is scheduled for 11 a.m. on Tuesday. For more information about the PL/PW Council, contact Hank Warsech, License Bureau Chief, either by phone at 444-2663 or by email at hwarsech@mt.gov. Or, visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov on the "Hunting" page under "Hunter Access."

Hotline available to report poaching, other violations

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks toll-free hotline for reporting wildlife poaching, property damage, and

violations of fish and game laws is in operation 24 hours a day.

TIP-MONT is the acronym for Turn in Poachers—Montana. Poaching includes:

- hunting out of season or at night using spotlights
- taking more than one's legal limit
- nonresidents who purchase resident licenses
- professional and commercial poachers who illegally offer outfitter and guide services.

When it comes to poaching, Montanans are saying, "Enough is enough!"

If you witnesses a fish and game violation, or property vandalism, you can report the crime by calling 1-800-TIP-MONT (1-800-847-6668); or Report a Violation online at fwp.mt.gov, then click "Enforcement". Callers will remain anonymous and may be eligible for a cash reward.

Hunter Education gun-safety tips

The 1,200 volunteers who teach Hunter Education remind all hunters there are

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 Gun Show - Lewis & Clark Co. Fair.
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four basic rules of gun safety.

- Always point the muzzle of your gun in a safe direction.

- Always treat every gun as if it were loaded.

- Always be sure of your target and beyond.

- Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to fire.

Hunting is a safe activity. It is up to each hunter to make responsible decisions to keep it that way.

Black bear season license purchase deadline is Aug. 31

Hunters may purchase a black bear license at all FWP offices, FWP license providers, or online at fwp.mt.gov, under Online Services until Aug. 31. After that date there is a 24-hour wait on the use of bear hunting licenses.

Black bear hunters must have successfully completed the Black Bear Identification

Test and must present a certificate of completion when purchasing a black bear license. The training and test are available on FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov under Quick Links choose "Education". A paper version of the test may be obtained at FWP offices.

2016 Black Bear hunting regulations are available on the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov, from FWP license providers and at FWP offices.

Migratory bird hunters need to get HIP

Everyone who hunts doves, ducks, geese, sandhill cranes, snipe, or coots in Montana must be "HIP" certified. HIP stands for Harvest Information Program.

To get HIP certified, Montana migratory bird hunters are simply asked, in general, how many ducks, geese, cranes, doves, coots and or

snipe they bagged last season in Montana. The answers are entered into Montana's Automated Licensing System to help with the management of migratory birds.

Ask first to hunt on private land

Don't wait until it is too late. Hunters who haven't already asked permission from private landowners to hunt need to do so as soon as possible.

Montana law requires hunters to obtain permission for all hunting on private land. Whether pursuing upland game birds, coyotes, gophers or any other wildlife, hunters must have permission from the landowner before hunting on private property.

Landowners may grant permission in person, over the phone, in writing or by posting signs that explain

what type of hunting is allowed and under what conditions hunting may occur on land owned or controlled by the landowner.

Stop at game check stations

State law requires hunters to stop at all game check stations while traveling to and from hunting areas. Failure to stop at a checking station when personnel are on duty is a misdemeanor punishable by a fine.

Biological and law enforcement game check stations may be set up together in the same place or in separate locations.

This fall, thousands of hunters will provide useful information during these annual game checks, contributing to the management of game animal populations and future hunting opportunities.

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Nonresident elk hunting licenses still available

FROM FWP

There's no wait for non-residents still seeking to buy a license to hunt elk in Montana this fall but the remaining licenses are in short supply compared to the past few years and are expected to sell out.

A number of first-come first served surplus licenses – good for antlered elk in some hunting districts – can be purchased online or over-the-counter at any Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks office.

Nonresident surplus elk combination license costs \$846, and allows one to hunt for elk and includes season conservation, fishing, and upland game bird licenses, and the hunting access enhancement fee.

Montana's big game archery season runs Sept. 3–Oct. 16; and the general rifle big game seasons run Oct. 22–Nov. 27, for a combined 11 weeks of hunting like none other in the West. For more information visit FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov.

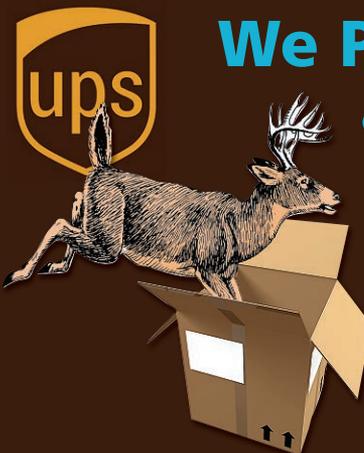


White-tailed deer
Robin Loznak, AP

Click “Nonresident Surplus Licenses”

Deer and elk are found throughout most of Montana. Hunters enjoy nearly 35 million acres of National Forest and other public land, as well as nearly 8 million acres of private land made available through the Block Management Program. Hunters must follow all regulations and obtain permission to hunt on private property.

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Block management information available

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

For the 2016 hunting season, 1,262 landowners have enrolled about 7.3 million acres in Montana's Block Management Program.

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) program provides hunters with public hunting access to private and isolated public land, free of charge, while assisting landowners in managing hunting activities.

FWP publishes one statewide Block Management Hunting Access Guide that includes information for all seven FWP administrative regions.

Beginning Aug. 15, the Hunting Access Guide and all BMA maps will be available on the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov. Hunting Access

Guides and regional BMA maps can be also obtained in person from regional offices (Regions 6 & 7 provide maps only from the website or on-site at the BMA) beginning Aug. 15.

Aug. 22 is the earliest date reservations can be accepted for those BMAs that require reservations.

While many BMA's do not require reservations, some do. Hunters can use the Hunting Access Guide to determine how permission is obtained for specific BMAs.

Additional tools to help hunters plan for hunts on Montana's 93 million acres of private and public land can be found on line at fwp.mt.gov. Click "Hunting," then view options under "Hunter Access."



FWP publishes one statewide Block Management Hunting Access Guide that includes information for all seven FWP administrative regions.

Hunter education classes

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will hold its fall Butte hunter education class beginning Aug. 22 at Highlands College (formerly Montana College of Technology, 25 Basin Creek Road. Online registration is required, and students under 18 years of age must have the consent of a parent or guardian.

Class times are as follows:
Monday, Aug. 22, 6 p.m. to 9:15 p.m.

Tuesday, Aug. 23, 6 p.m. to 9:15 p.m.

Wednesday, Aug. 24, 6 p.m. to 9:15 p.m.

Thursday, Aug. 25, 6 p.m. to 9:15 p.m.

Friday, Aug. 26, 6 p.m. to 9:15 p.m.

Sunday, Aug. 28, 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. (field day at the Rocker Range). Arrival times for the field day will be assigned to students during class.

Online registration is required by going to FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov, clicking on Education, then Hunter Education, then "Find a Class or Field Course." Students must print, sign and bring the Acknowledgement of Risk, Student Agreement Form and the Hunter Education Student Code of Ethics (found on the event registration page) the first night of class. Students are not allowed to bring firearms or ammunition to class.

Prior to the first class meeting, students are required to read the hunter education manual and complete all chapter quizzes. If not complete, students will not be admitted. Manuals can be picked up at Bugs and Bullets, Bob Wards, or Three Bears in Butte.

A student must be 10 years old to register for the course.



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Use common sense when field dressing

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks reminds hunters that simple, common sense precautions are part of the safe and proper field dressing of big game.

The Antelope 900 series archery season opens Aug. 15, followed by the general archery season for antelope, bear, wolf, deer, elk and mountain lion on Sept. 3.

“While the chance of contracting a disease from wild game is remote, it makes good sense to take a few simple precautions,” said Ron Aasheim, spokesman for FWP in Helena.

Here are some of the precautions that FWP recommends to hunters handling harvested game including waterfowl, game birds, deer and elk.

Do not shoot, handle or consume any animal that is acting abnormally or that appears sick. Contact FWP if you see an animal that appears sick.

Wear rubber gloves when field dressing any game animal.

Bone out the meat from your deer or elk. Avoid sawing through bone when you can and avoid cutting through the brain or spinal cord (backbone).

Minimize contact with animal brain, intestines, fluids, spinal tissue and feces.

Be mindful of humans and domestic dogs touching or coming in contact with animal parts or feces as it can be contaminated and transmit parasites.

Prevent dogs from eating the internal organs of game animals.

If you have your wild meat commercially processed, request that your animal is handled individually, without meat from other animals being added to meat from your animal.

Wash hands and forearms after field dressing game animals.

Cook all game meat until well done.

Additionally, early season big game hunts can present unique challenges when trying to get a large animal from the field to the processor. Here are some tips caring for big game when the weather is warm.

The bone is what retains the heat and is the source of the problem and causes meat to ultimately sour in the event that it does. You need to expose the bone to ambient air as the bone transfers the heat to the muscle.

Split down the spine from



Thom Bridge, Montana Lee Newspapers

A buck mule deer is seen on high alert.

More **DRESSING**, page 28

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2016 Big game hunting seasons

Antelope

900 Aug. 15–Nov. 13
 Archery Sept. 3–Oct. 7
 General Oct. 8–Nov. 13

Bighorn Sheep

Archery Sept. 3–Sept. 14
 General Sept. 15–Nov. 27

Bison

General Nov. 15–Feb. 15, 2017

Black Bear

Archery Sept. 3–Sept. 14
 Fall Sept. 15–Nov. 27

Deer and Elk

Archery Sept. 3–Oct. 16
 Youth-Deer Only Oct. 20–21
 General Oct. 22–Nov. 27
 Archery Sept. 3–Sept. 14

Backcountry (HDs 150, 151, 280, 316)
 General Sept. 15–Nov. 27

Moose

General Sept. 15–Nov. 27

Mountain goat

General Sept. 15–Nov. 27

Mountain Lion

Archery Sept. 3–Oct. 16
 Fall Oct. 22–Nov. 27
 Winter Dec. 1–April 14, 2017

Wolf

Archery Sept. 3–Sept. 14
 General Sept. 15–March 15, 2017
 Trapping Dec. 15–Feb. 28, 2017



A pronghorn antelope grazes near Gardiner.

BOB ZELLAR, *Montana Lee Newspapers*

Dressing

continued from Page 27

the inside, through the spine and backbone to the hide. The carcass should be opened up all the way from the pelvis to the neck.

Open up the round area by cutting through the round into the bone as that's another place that is a significant problem for heat retention.

Have lots of ice available. Bring an extra cooler and put blocks or bags of ice in it. Ice stored in a cooler that's left closed will last for days and be available when you need it in the field. Blocks last longer than bags. Water should be drained from the cooler to maintain the ice.

Skinning a carcass cools it fastest, but if you're making a relatively short trip from the field to home or field to camp, you can fill the body

cavity of an unskinned deer or elk with ice bags to help cool it. Be beware, body heat can remain in the thickest parts of the animal, such as the hindquarters, and stuffing with ice is only a temporary measure. Do not rely on ice in the body cavity to cool larger animals like elk and moose.

If it's too warm to hang a deer or elk outside, skin and quarter it and put the meat on ice. A large cooler will hold most or all of a deer that's been quartered, or an elk that has been cut into smaller pieces. Remember to leave evidence of sex, as per rules on page 15 of the 2016 deer, elk and antelope regulations.

Know where the nearest meat processing facilities are located and know their hours of operation. Do a little homework before your hunt so you will know where and when you can take your game to cool it quickly.

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Hunters must expect to see bears

FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

With Montana's upland game bird season opening Sept. 1 — and the bow hunting season set to open Sept. 3 — remember that slow moving, quiet and camouflaged hunters will soon be sharing the landscape with the state's even stealthier bears that may be stalking similar prey.

It may not be an encounter one hopes for, but all hunters must be aware there is that potential.

Grizzly bears are found throughout western Montana, not just the Rocky Mountain Front, Bob Marshall Wilderness complex and the Yellowstone ecosystem. Black bears also range widely across the state.

Upland game bird hunters



Courtesy Montana FWP

and archers hunting in bear country should:

- carry bear spray and know how to use it

- hunt with a partner and let someone else know your plans

- get harvested big game

out of the woods quickly

- upon returning to a site where harvested game is left unattended, study the site at a distance for any movement or changes and signal your approach by making plenty of noise

- never attempt to frighten or haze a bear from a carcass
- contact FWP if a bear has consumed a carcass or covered it with debris rendering it unsalvageable

For more on bears, visit FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov; then click Be Bear Aware. Bear resistant products are described on the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee's website at www.igbconline.org. A "How to Hunt Safely in Grizzly Country" brochure is also available at FWP regional offices.



Submit your hunting photos!

The Independent Record, The Montana Standard and Mini Nickel, may feature photographs submitted by local hunters in print, online and/or on social media. Submit your photos online for consideration to be published in the IR, Standard or Mini Nickel during this hunting season.



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Big Game!

Thank you to these local hunters who submitted photos! From left: Nicole Swoboda of Butte, Keith Sayers of Butte, and Trey Wheeler of Great Falls. Check out more photos submitted at helenair.com, mtstandard.com and mininickel.com throughout the season!

Free bow season prep tips

Bugs N Bullets Sport Shop, 40 Sportsman Way, will host free seminars to help hunters get ready for bow season which starts on Aug. 15 with the 900 Series Antelope Season and general bow hunting season on Sept. 3.

All seminars start at 7 p.m. The schedule follows:

Aug. 9 – Cicely and Ray Nichols will provide a seminar on how to debone your animal in the field using the gutless method. The seminar will also include information on the proper way to take care of your game before and after you get it home.

Aug. 16 – A representative from Badlands Packs and Clothing will be available to discuss the Approach clothing line designed to blend in with any color and camouflage you anywhere.

Aug. 24 – Rod Alne will lead the survival seminar. Alne has 27 years of experience with the Air Force's elite Para rescue units and 15 years of instructor experience specializing in emergency medicine, wilderness survival, mountaineering, rope rescue systems, navigation, and skydiving. He is also a Wilderness First Aid instructor and Level II Avalanche/Rescue qualified.

Free samples, prizes and demonstrations are planned during most seminars.

Details: 406-782-6251 or go to Bugs N Bullets Sport Shop Facebook page.



Butte's Rod Alne, who owns a wilderness survival training company, was featured in Outdoor Life magazine. He will discuss survival skills Aug. 24 at Bugs N Bullets sporting goods store in Butte.



Antelope season begins Sept. 3.



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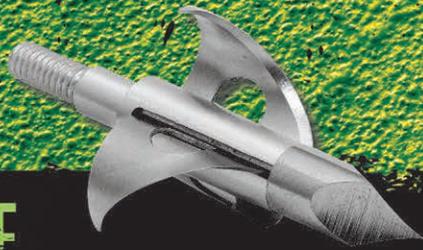
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